

The Register-Guard

This plan could fly: Proposal expands Mount Hood wilderness

A (Eugene) Register-Guard Editorial
Published: Friday, December 2, 2005

The political climate in Washington, D.C., is chilly for proposals to create wilderness areas - just ask Sen. Ron Wyden, whose bill for 177,000 acres of new wilderness near Mount Hood died a cold and lonely death last year. A new proposal should find a warmer reception, while providing a model for future wilderness additions in Oregon.

Oregon Reps. Greg Walden and Earl Blumenauer unveiled their proposal Tuesday. It would expand wilderness acreage on and around Mount Hood by 40 percent, or 75,000 acres, and designate 15 miles of streams as wild and scenic waterways. The two congressmen also propose a number of steps to address transportation problems, regulate development and improve forest health in the Mount Hood region.

Walden and Blumenauer are unlikely allies. Walden, from Hood River, is a Republican representing one of the most rural districts in the country. Blumenauer, of Portland, is an urban Democrat. But the boundary between their districts runs over the summit of Mount Hood. The two explored their shared interests on a 41-mile hike around Mount Hood last summer, and forged the type of legislative partnership that might succeed in getting a wilderness bill through Congress.

Walden brings to the partnership his chairmanship of the House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health. No Mount Hood wilderness bill is likely to clear the House without Walden's support. Blumenauer brings credibility on environmental issues; his support will help persuade Democrats that Walden has moved toward middle ground.

The Walden-Blumenauer proposal will disappoint those who had hoped to see a greater expansion of wilderness. It would add protection to less than half as much land as Wyden's proposal. Even Wyden's bill was seen by wilderness advocates as inadequate; the Oregon Natural Resources Council has pushed for a 265,000-acre expansion. Yet as Wyden's effort showed, asking for more can mean getting nothing.

The exclusive focus on Mount Hood is also a disappointment. Areas elsewhere in Oregon are equally deserving candidates for wilderness designation. Environmentalists hope that two of them - 23,000 acres in Southern Oregon's Soda Mountain National Monument, and the 11,500-acre Copper Salmon area east of the coastal town of Port Orford - can be added to the Mount Hood legislation. Those additions would be welcome, but they should be made only if they would not sink the Walden-Blumenauer plan.

Wyden and Gordon Smith should replicate the Walden-Blumenauer partnership in the Senate, and if they can, expand the proposal. Fifty years from now, Oregonians will not be wishing their grandparents had designated fewer public lands as wilderness. Future generations will not benefit, however, from overreaching proposals that leave their supporters empty-handed.

When an opportunity for a significant wilderness expansion presents itself, Oregonians should take it.

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